

Restraints Fray and Risks Grow as Nuclear Club Gains Members



Vahid Salemi/Associated Press, 2005

The International Atomic Energy Agency has helped Iran develop its civilian nuclear program, but at the Natanz uranium enrichment plant, above, its inspectors have checked for signs that Iran is developing weapons.

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By [WILLIAM J. BROAD](#) and [DAVID E. SANGER](#)

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The declaration last Monday by [North Korea](#) that it had conducted a successful atomic test brought to nine the number of nations believed to have nuclear arms. But atomic officials estimate that as many as 40 more countries have the technical skill, and in some cases the required material, to build a bomb.

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That ability, coupled with new nuclear threats in Asia and the Middle East, risks a second nuclear age, officials and arms control specialists say, in which nations are more likely to abandon the old restraints against atomic weapons.

The spread of nuclear technology is expected to accelerate as nations redouble their reliance on atomic power. That will give more countries the ability to make reactor fuel, or, with the same equipment and a little more effort, bomb fuel — the hardest part of the arms equation.

Signs of activity abound. Hundreds of companies are now prospecting for uranium where dozens did a few years ago. Argentina, Australia and South Africa are drawing up plans to begin enriching uranium, and other countries are considering doing the same. Egypt is reviving its program to develop nuclear power.

Concern about the situation led the [International Atomic Energy Agency](#) to summon hundreds of government officials and experts from around the world to Vienna in September to discuss tightening restrictions on who is permitted to produce nuclear fuel.

“These dangers are urgent,” Sam Nunn, an expert on nuclear proliferation and a former Democratic senator, told the group. “We are in a race between cooperation and catastrophe and, at this moment, the outcome is unclear.”

But even the atomic agency itself exemplifies some of the underlying tensions inherent in the development of nuclear energy.

For decades, the I.A.E.A., known as the world’s nuclear policeman, has pursued its other mandate — to promote safe nuclear power — by running technical aid programs with roughly a hundred states. Some of that knowledge could be useful in a weapons program, though the aid is meant exclusively for civilian use.

The agency still helps Pakistan, which exploded a nuclear bomb in 1998. It also helped North Korea until a decade ago. Even today, it is assisting Iran, which many experts fear is close to mastering the basics of making a bomb. It has 14 programs under way with Iran, including a study on upgrading a nuclear research laboratory, as well as helping it start

up its Bushehr reactor.

North Korea's reported test has shaken the nuclear status quo and raised anew the question of whether Asia will be the first to feel a nuclear "domino effect," in which states clandestinely hedge their bets by assembling the crucial technologies needed to make a bomb, or actually cross the line to become new weapons states. In the Middle East, the confrontation with Iran has focused new attention on countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, both of which fear that an Iranian bomb would make Tehran the greatest power in the region.

[Mohamed ElBaradei](#), the director general of the I.A.E.A., has estimated that up to 49 nations now know how to make nuclear arms, and he has warned that global tensions could push some over the line.

"We are relying," he said, "primarily on the continued good intentions of these countries — intentions which are in turn based on their sense of security or insecurity, and could therefore be subject to rapid change."

Worry about proliferation is hardly new. In March 1963, President [John F. Kennedy](#) said, "I am haunted by the feeling that by 1970, unless we are successful, there may be 10 nuclear powers instead of 4, and by 1975, 15 or 20." That timetable proved to be inaccurate. But in recent years there has been a sense around the globe that President Kennedy's prediction is about to come true, three decades late.

[Kofi Annan](#), the [United Nations](#) secretary general, said this year that "the international community seems almost to be sleepwalking" down a path where states, after long living without nuclear arms, now feel compelled to revisit their logic.

He warned of a new arms race — not one of superpowers, but of regional powers. "Perhaps most damaging of all," he concluded, "there is also a perception that the possession of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction offers the best protection against being attacked."

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[Democrats](#) and [Republicans](#) spent the past week arguing over who lost control of North Korea, [Bill Clinton](#) or [George W. Bush](#). But seeds of the problem were planted by President [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#), just months after the armistice ended the fighting on the Korean Peninsula in 1953.

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